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ABSTRACT

"The House of the Seven Gables" describes the problems that emerge when a family allows itself to become so locked into the traditions and sins of the past that each new generation becomes a slightly degenerated facsimile of the previous generation. Nathaniel Hawthorne manages this task by comparing Clifford, a descendent of a long line of aristocracy, with Holgrave, the descendent of another old family that has recently merged its blood with that of the masses. As a boy Holgrave was forced to take care of himself but this situation did not really create much of a problem for him because it aptly suited the natural force of his will. Hawthorne writes that the true value of Holgrave's character lay in that deep consciousness of inward strength, which made all his past vicissitudes seem like a change of garments. Further, Holgrave's keen perception is due to his having immersed himself in humanity. He does not cling to the past or to his ancient family name. Clifford, by contrast, has allowed his family's past and his overly aesthetic nature to deny him a life of his own, though he feels a pull to join the rush and roar of the human tide. If Clifford eventually leaves the past behind him, his progress or growth is obscured by his coming into an inheritance. The ambiguities of the novel's ending (mirroring those of Hawthorne himself) have led to the novel's unpopularity in school curriculums. (TB)

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The Repressive Nature of the Past: Hawthorne's "House of the Seven Gables"

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THE REPRESSIVE NATURE OF THE PAST

HAWTHORNE'S HOUSE OF THE SEVEN GABLES

The House of the Seven Gables in many respects is Hawthorne's most personal novel, for in some ways it mirrors his own house and the problems he encountered in separating the past from the present. In the story the Pyncheons, like the Hathornes, were an old aristocratic family deeply rooted in the history of Puritan New England. Crews argues that the House has an "autobiographical significance." For instance, the curse hurled by Maule at Colonel Pyncheon closely resembles the one the accused witch, Sarah Good, supposedly hurled at John Hathorne in the Salem Witch Trials (Crews 174). Milton Stern adds that the root of the so-called lost Pyncheon empire was based upon a claim of Hawthorne's maternal ancestors, the Mannings. This family, like the Pyncheons, had been deeded lands by the Indians in the seventeenth century. The claim had somehow been lost, but time and time again the family had attempted to recover title to it (xvii). Hawthorne, like Clifford, was also confronted with how he could escape the sins of his fathers and begin a new life of his own.

I contend that in his novel Hawthorne attempts to come to grips with the past by graphically describing the problems that emerge when a family allows itself to become so locked into the traditions and sins of the past that each new generation becomes a slightly degenerated facsimile of the previous generation. Hawthorne manages this task by comparing Clifford, a descendent

of a long line of aristocracy, with Holgrave, the descendant of another old family that has recently merged its blood with that of the masses.

Hawthorne makes these comparisons even more striking by structurally arranging them in adjacent chapters. For instance, Holgrave is important in chapter six which is followed by Clifford's entrance in chapter seven. Chapters eight through eleven are basically concerned with Clifford, and Phoebe's relationship to him. This section is in turn followed by three chapters in which we see Holgrave and Phoebe together. In this section Holgrave makes clear his objections to the past and spells out his remedy for them. In the section that follows, Clifford is forced to test this remedy.

Holgrave is first described to the reader as a rather strange man who associates himself with reformers, temperance lectures, and come-outers (84). By profession he is a daguerreotypist, and it is rumored that he is a vegetarian and practices "animal magnetism." Later, we discover that Holgrave was forced to take care of himself when he was just a boy. Hawthorne, however, notes that this situation did not really create that much of a problem for Holgrave since the condition aptly suited the natural force of his will. During the course of his life, Holgrave had worked at a number of different jobs, but the positions were always of the type that placed him in the center of human activity. He had traveled a great deal and had seen much of Europe, but in all of his travels and job changes, he had never lost his true identity or violated his inner nature

(176-177). Hawthorne stresses that,

> The true value of his character lay in that deep consciousness of inward strength, which made all his past vicissitudes seem like a change of garments; in that enthusiasm, so quiet that he scarcely knew of its existence, but which gave a warmth to everything that he laid his hand on; in that personal ambition, . . . lurked a certain efficacy, that might solidify him from a theorist into the champion of some practical cause. (180-181)

Throughout the story Holgrave seems always to be associated with light. For example, when he visits Hepzibah's shop in chapter two, Holgrave steps out of the morning light and brings some of its cheery influence with him (43). Most of his appearances in the book take place outside in the light of the sun. His profession also makes great use of light, and the light allows him to see people as they really are. He says,

> There is a wonderful insight in heaven's broad and simple sunshine. While we give it credit only for depicting the merest surface, it actually brings out the secret character with a truth that no painter would ever venture upon, even could he detect it. (91)

Holgrave's keen perception is due to his having immersed himself in humanity. He does not cling to the past or to his ancient family name. He wants to live his own life in the present without the shadow of the past clouding his perception.

Because of this keen insight and his close association with his fellow man, Holgrave has developed a philosophy concerning the repressive nature of the past upon the present along with a solution for dealing with that repression. In one sense, Holgrave's ideas reflect those of the Jeffersonian Democrats. This fact could suggest that Hawthorne is not only contrasting individuals, but also political parties and in the telling of his story is making suggestions about the future course of American Government.

Holgrave reveals his philosophy in two separate episodes in the story. The first occurs in chapter three when Hepzibah first opens her spice shop. In her mind this is a demeaning act. She feels the past rising up and saying, "This is not proper for a lady." Hawthorne describes her act as, "the final term of what called itself old gentility" (37). Holgrave, however, welcomes her commercial endeavor with enthusiasm. He says,

> Hitherto, the life-blood has been gradually chilling in your veins, as you sat aloof, within your circle of gentility, while the rest of the world was fighting out its battle with one kind of necessity or another. Henceforth, you will at least have the sense of healthy and natural effort for a purpose, and of lending your strength--be it great or small--to the united struggle of mankind. (44-45)

When Hepzibah then reproaches herself for failing to live up to her definition of a lady, Holgrave states his philosophy even more aggressively.

> The names of gentleman and lady had a meaning, in the past history of the world, and conferred privileges, desirable, or otherwise, on those entitled to bear them. In the present--and still more in the future condition of society--they imply, no privilege, but restriction. (45)

Thus, it seems clear that Holgrave believes that each person must create his own life with its own achievements. Resting upon the achievements and struggle of past generations is equivalent to living in the past and a person who does so has no real life of his own.

Later, in the scene with Phoebe in the garden, Holgrave further elaborates on the need of freeing oneself from the past. His comments take on a societal dimension as he notes that our legal system, culture, morality, and religious faith, are all products of the past, all attempts of dead men to impose themselves upon future generations. Holgrave, using the house as a symbol to represent the past, offers his own opinion as to what course the future should take.

> If each generation were allowed and expected to build its own houses, that single change, comparatively unimportant in itself, would imply almost every reform which society is now suffering for. I doubt whether even our public edifices . . . ought to be built of such permanent material as stone or brick. It were better that they should crumble to ruin once, in twenty years, or thereabouts, as a hint to the people to examine into and reform the institutions which

they symbolize. (183-184)

Thus, Holgrave argues that each generation needs to provide for itself. Trusting in and preserving the institutions and values of the past, which may no longer have any meaning in the present, is folly. Each generation needs to establish its own institutions which reflect its own beliefs and values. It is also important to note that in this same scene Holgrave declares his own independence from his private past. Although he is sorely tempted, Holgrave refuses to use a malignant skill on Phoebe that he has inherited from his ancestors: the ability to mesmerize.

Standing in the stark contrast to Holgrave is Clifford Pyncheon the representative of the aristocratic past. Hawthorne describes him as "a substantial emptiness, a material ghost" (105). Like a ghost he views the outside world from behind the curtain of an arched window, and Phoebe notices, as she attends him, the image of a veil "under which far more of this spirit was hidden that revealed, and through which he imperfectly discerned the outside world" (143-144). Unlike Holgrave, Clifford isolates himself from his fellow man. Hawthorne calls Clifford a Sybarite, and this trait causes him to turn his eyes away from the common and only to look upon that which is beautiful. To Clifford the little bell at the shop door (one of the few connections the Pyncheon family has to the outside world) produces a hateful clamor. He also rejects the writers of society that Phoebe reads him, for his mind, "had utterly lost its estimates of modes and manners" (134).

Clifford has allowed his family's past and his overly aesthetic nature to deny him a life of his own. For example, he spends most of his time slumbering in some chair. When alert, he lives in a past world populated by the antique fashions that are dear to him. Clifford is like the chicken in the Pyncheon garden, a degenerate form of what was once a noble breed, and, like the chicken, he is devoid of promise and becomes only a thing to be looked after by others. Clifford's deficiencies are particularly noticeable after he becomes inspired by the poetry Phoebe reads him: "when the glow left him, he seemed conscious of a missing sense and power, and groped about for them, as if a blind man should go seeking his lost eyesight" (146). Clifford realizes that something is missing in his life but is unable to determine what it is.

Although Clifford has a repugnance at the thought of personal contact with the outside world, a conflict exists within him to join the rush and roar of the human tide. This conflict first becomes evident when a political parade passes in front of the Pyncheon mansion. Clifford, viewing the parade from above, imagines it "as a mighty river of life, massive in its tide, and black with mystery, and, out of its depths, calling to the kindred depth within him" (165). He attempts to leap from the second story balcony but is restrained in his effort. He later says, "had I taken that plunge, and survived it, methinks it would have made me another man!" (166). This incident is followed by an attempt by Hepzibah and Clifford to restore fellowship with their fellow man in a house of worship. This

attempt also ends in failure:

> They pulled open the front-door, and stepped across the threshold, and felt, both of them, as if they were standing in the presence of the whole world, and with mankind's great and terrible eye on them alone. The eye of their Father seemed to be withdrawn, and gave them no encouragement . . .
>
> "It cannot be, Hepzibah!--it is too late," said Clifford, with deep sadness.--"We are ghosts! We have no right among human beings,--no right anywhere, but in this old house, which has a curse on it, and which therefore we are doomed to haunt!" (169)

Clifford later, however, acknowledges that it is not the past itself that imprisons him, but rather his own heart.

Finally, when pressured by the judge to reveal old family secrets, Clifford frees himself by leaving the house and the past it represents and is thus drawn into the larger current of humanity. Clifford's assertiveness confirms the value of Holgrave's philosophy, for the act transforms him from a helpless invalid needing to be looked after to a man who can care for others. Hawthorne says of him, "he had been startled into manhood and intellectual vigor; or, at least into a condition that resembled them, though it might be both diseased and transitory" (258). During the journey on the train, Clifford begins to understand how the past has enslaved him. He lays aside his old ideas and embraces radically different new ones. In a conversation on the train he says, "It is as clear to me as

sunshine . . . that the greatest possible stumbling-blocks in the path of human happiness and improvement, are these heaps of bricks, and stones, . . . which men painfully contrive for their own torment, and call them house and home!" (261). As he shares these ideas, his physical appearance actually changes: "Clifford's countenance glowed, as he divulged his theory; a youthful character shone out from within, converting the wrinkles and pallid duskiness of age into an almost transparent mask" (260).

The effervescence of Clifford's mood subsides when the past reaches out to reclaim him as the train passes a "wooden church, black, with age, and in a dismal state of ruin and decay," and an old farmhouse "as venerably black as the church" (266). In spite of his inability to escape, Clifford does not sink into his former intellectual prison. In this assertion of independence, he recovers enough of his faculties to restore partially his character and to provide him with some sense of happiness. This happiness is, some say, further assured by his inheriting his cousin's estate which provides him with the means to leave the past, and what it represents, behind.

This conclusion, however, causes serious problems in interpreting the book's central message. Cunliffe feels that these problems are so great as to flaw an otherwise successful book (100). Waggoner points out that Hawthorne's ambivalent conclusion creates a number of ambiguities that are not resolved. For instance, since inheritance had been at the heart of Clifford's problems all along, it does not seem plausible that

one inheritance can cure the effects of a previous inheritance (170-193). Hawthorne also seems to be quarreling with the point he has been trying to make throughout the novel when he suggests that what Clifford needed now, "was the love of a very few; not the admiration, or even the respect, of the unknown many" (313). In addition, many readers are shocked by Holgrave's mitigation of his political philosophy when he is confronted by the opportunity to obtain fortune through marriage. Although his words might seem to suggest a logical compromise, the restrictions imposed by them are as real as any he had previously attacked:

> But I wonder that the late judge . . . should not have felt the propriety of embodying so excellent a piece of domestic architecture in stone, rather than wood. Then, every generation of the family might have altered the interior, to suit its own taste and convenience; while the exterior, through the lapse of years, might have been adding venerableness to its original beauty, . . . (314)

These ambiguities from the novel's ending arise from the author himself who was never able to resolve them in his own life. Crews rather perceptively comments on Hawthorne when he says, "Hawthorne never treats his family history without a mixture of shame and pride" (37). The shame is obvious and present in almost everything Hawthorne wrote. Yet, as a very insecure man, Hawthorne welcomed the guilty identity of his Puritan past, for even it was better than no identity at all. This same attitude which rejects the past while desperately

clinging to it pervades the ending of The House of the Seven Gables and unfortunately diminishes its value.

For the college student/reader of today these examinations of the American literary canon help clarify just why certain works have entered the canon and why others have not. Hawthorne's masterpiece, "The Scarlet Letter," is still being read in high school, but "House of the Seven Gables" is not.

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